

# Special Tribute on Morris F. Collen: Charismatic Leader of Medical Informatics

Marion Ball<sup>1</sup>, Donald Lindberg<sup>2</sup>, Izet Masic<sup>3</sup>

IBM Research, Baltimore, USA<sup>1</sup>

National Library in Medicine, Bethesda, USA<sup>2</sup>

University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>3</sup>

Corresponding author: Marion J. Ball Ed.D, professor emerita, Senior Advisor, Healthcare Informatics, IBM Research, Email: marionball@us.ibm.com

## ABSTRACT

This editorial is dedicated in honor of Morris F. Collen, MD, a pioneer in the field of medical informatics. During his remarkable career, Dr. Collen's has made many important contributions not only to the field of medical informatics, but also to the public health and the creation of new models of payment and prevention. His endeavors and ideas found fertile ground and left a mark not only in the national, but also in the international setting.

**Key words:** Morris F. Collen, Medical informatics.

## 1. THE REMARKABLE STORY

Dr. Morris Collen (figure 1,2,3) started his career in 1942, as a young doctor in the Richmond Shipyards administering to Henry J. Kaiser Richmond shipyard workers. During World War II he became a nationally recognized authority on the treatment of pneumonia. In 1948, Dr. Collen became one of the seven founding physicians of the Permanente Medical Group. From 1953 to 1961, he served as physician-in-chief at Kaiser Permanente in San Francisco. In 1961, Collen was named founding director of Kaiser Permanente's Medical Methods Research – now the Division of Research – known today for research in drug safety, risk-factor epidemiology, and genetics (1). He ended his tenure in 1979 when he became director of the Division of Technology Assessment. His greatest influence was his friend, mentor, and colleague Sidney R. Garfield, MD (2). Before engaging in medicine, Dr. Collen had obtained a degree in electrical engineering. Therefore, he had a vision of conjugating two of these by applying computer technology to improve care in medicine. He himself predicted that computers will probably have “the greatest technological impact on medical science since the invention of the microscope.”(2)

Dr Collen started his work in medical informatics by creating the multiphasic health checkup. The checkup was composed of tests and procedures that screened conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer and other illnesses (1). This method was widely accepted in public health medicine for its preventive aspect as well as saving physicians' time.

Thereafter, he developed a prototype electronic health record. Collen's early foray into electronic collection

and storage of patient data was Kaiser Permanente's first step on the road to becoming a leader in health records technology.

The Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association (*JAMIA*) and *Methods* recognized his worth and his greatness describing him as “a world-class scientist, an advisor to American presidents, and a profound humanist, who started out as an exemplary clinician. Dr. Collen's qualities put him, from the start, in the midst of an environment rife with innovation and opportunity, and marked by other giants”(3).

He accomplished much of his work in many capacities with the National Library of Medicine (NLM), the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States, the American Medical Informatics Association and many others.

His scientific publications include over 200 articles and numerous books in the areas of internal medicine, preventive medicine, health services research, multiphasic testing, technology assessment, and medical informatics (4). As an NLM Scholar-in-Residence from 1987-1993, he made a historical review of health care information system published in the book *The History of Medical Informatics in the United States*, which is considered as classics.

Dr Collen's awards are too numerous to list in this editorial. One of his greatest distinction was definitely the Medal for Outstanding Contributions to the Field of

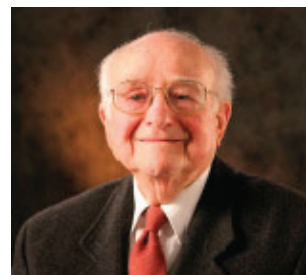


Figure 1. Morris F. Collen (1913-)

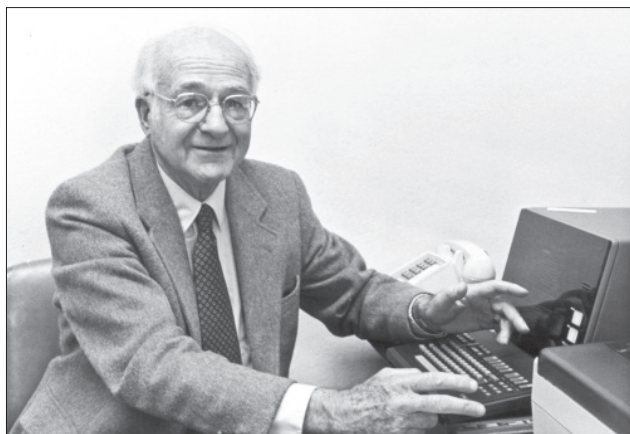


Figure 2. Collen at Northern California Research Department

Medical Informatics, honored by the by the American College of Medical Informatics (ACMI) in 1993. The Morris F. Collen Medal is an award given in his name to exceptional achievers in medical informatics (3).

Although a centenarian, Dr. Collen still accomplishes much. He is currently working on the second edition of his book entitled *The History of Medical Informatics in the United States*.

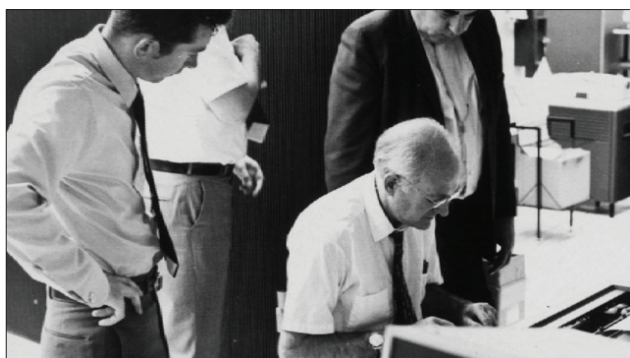


Figure 3. Collen at computer terminal

## 2. THE TRIBUTES

By reading the tributes of his colleagues, we will get the full sense of the great visionary Morris F. Collen, or Morrie – how was he amid colleagues and friends named.

One of his colleagues, Robert Pearl, MD, Executive Director and CEO of The Kaiser Permanente Medical Group, described Morrie Collen's phenomenal legacy in this way. "When I think of Morrie Collen, I think of two words, pioneer and vision. He was not just a year or two ahead of his time, he was decades ahead of his time....

Morrie understood that to be successful, Kaiser Permanente had to not just practice great medicine; it had to create great medicine. He created a focus on research.... He understood that our members would be our members for decades to come. And so, it was essential that we invest in systems and approaches that would make them healthier..."(5)

Bruce Sams, MD, second Executive Director of Kaiser Permanente said "One of the things that was most impressive about Morrie is his keen, analytical mind. He sees things very clearly; he analyzes them as a very logical way of approaching a problem. ... He had visions of other things that could be done – particularly in the computer world – and he was so far ahead of his time"(5, 6, 7).

## 3. CONCLUSION

Dr. Collen is unambiguously the guru of medical informatics. His work is characterized by quality, breadth of coverage, and the spirit of service. It reflects the intensity and the quality of the man himself. Therefore, Dr. Morris F. Collen deserves respect and thanks for the great job done, with a wish to carry out much productive work in the coming times.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST: NONE DECLARED.**

## REFERENCES

1. Lindberg DA, Ball MJ. Morris F. Collen at 100: A Tribute to "The Father of Medical Informatics". *Methods Inf Med*. 2013; 52(5): 371-373.
2. Kaiser Permanente. Morris F. Collen, MD, Director Emeritus. Available at: [http://www.dor.kaiser.org/external/DORExternal/research\\_report/collen\\_tribute.aspx](http://www.dor.kaiser.org/external/DORExternal/research_report/collen_tribute.aspx). Accessed: January 07, 2014.
3. Moehr JR. To Morris F. Collen: Happy ninetieth! *J Am Med Inform Assoc*. 2003; 10: 613-615.
4. TPMG Awards. Morris F. Collen Research Award. Available at: <http://xnet.kp.org/ncal/tpmgawards/collen/about.html>; Accessed January 07, 2014.
5. Morris F. Collen, M.D. Tribute (videotape), 2009. Available at: <http://xnet.kp.org/ncal/tpmgawards/collen/about.html>; Accessed January 07, 2014.
6. Masic I. The History and New Trends of Medical Informatics. *Donald School J Ultrasound Obstet Gynecol*. 2013; 7(3): 301-3012.
7. Masic I. History of Informatics and Medical Informatics. Avicena. Sarajevo, 2013: 61-62.